

Fail-Safe

By Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler

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Excerpt from Chapter 5: The Flayed Bull

Black's early morning drive out Long Island to Mitchell Air Force Base was not slowed down by traffic. He arrived with plenty of time to spare for the flight to Washington. The day was clear and mild, and he checked out a Cessna 310. He had never lost his affection for a small, light plane. Even the 310 was automated, but it was still fun to fly. Someday he wanted to buy one of the quick stubby stunt biplanes that were now being reproduced, and recapture the old thrill of flying, to fly rather than to administer a plane.

As he settled on course for Washington, he felt the need suddenly of a cold drink of water, and last night's cocktail party came flooding back through his mind. He had not wanted to go at all. Betty had never taken to Groteschele. Black also knew he would be listening to Groteschele at today's briefing. So when Senator Hartmann's secretary called he'd tried to beg off.

But Hartmann was insistent. He had collared Emmett Foster, the editor of the *Liberal Magazine*, which constantly criticized nuclear testing and supported unilateral disarmament. What Hartmann wanted was a cocktail party confrontation between Foster and Groteschele. Each in his way was distinguished. They merely happened to be at opposite ends of the controversy over thermonuclear warfare. Hartmann was no fool. A Midwestern Republican with a vigorous shock of white

hair, sanguine complexion, and Falstaffian girth, he oared like William Jennings Bryan and generally looked like a musical-comedy senator. But under that shock of white hair operated one of the finest minds in Washington. As a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee he wanted to hear the two points of view in an informal environment. He knew that Black was considered a "brainy" general and was a link between the purely tactical people in SAC and the Big Planners at the Pentagon. Groteschele had, of course, become famous after the publication of *Counter-Escalation*, which Foster had dissected and left for dead in the pages of his magazine.

Usually Betty refused to go to military-government-academic cocktail parties. To Black's surprise she insisted on going to this one.

They had arrived late. Foster was there, but Groteschele, as usual, was even later. Foster stood in a corner talking in a firm, even voice. Black realized that the man would be no pushover. To Black most "professional liberals" had shrill voices, spoke in a rush, and accused anyone who questioned their facts of favoring nuclear extermination. Facts were unimportant. Survival, common morality, humanity, damage to unborn generations—this was their chant.

Not Emmett Foster. He was a cool one and Black could tell it instantly. Even as they moved across the room, Foster, a short muscular man with hard black eyes, used words and phrases which indicated he had read the *Congressional Record* and the scientific journals and probably interviewed a number of military people. Also Foster didn't skip around. He answered questions precisely, sticking relentlessly to the point and relying on real evidence. Betty and Black listened for fifteen minutes and Betty turned to Black, her eyebrows arched.

"No fool," she said.

"No fool," Black agreed.

At that moment Grotteschele arrived. He had not changed much physically since graduate-school days. A bit heavier, but not grossly so. But he was dressed better and he had the air of authority about him. He is almost silken, Black thought. He smiled easily, said something to everyone he was introduced to, patted Black on the shoulder, kissed Betty on the cheek. He smelled slightly of men's cologne.

Hartmann introduced him to Foster, but Grotteschele smiled and said they had already met. Without a wasted motion Grotteschele moved beside Foster, stationed himself for the debate, but with no sign of antagonism or of condescension.

Foster waited until the introductions were over and went on.

"Times have changed since Clausewitz. True, war was an institution like church or the family or private property. But institutions grow obsolete, exhaust their function," Foster argued. "Real tough-mindedness consists in recognizing that thermonuclear war is not the extension of policy by other means, it is the end of everything—people, policy, institutions.

"Grotteschele," Foster said in his firm unyielding manner, "is a modern Don Quixote, dashing through the stratosphere on nuclear jaunts, talking of obliteration as if it could be made partial, hypnotized by his own words."

Foster stopped almost politely, and looked at Grotteschele. Grotteschele rocked on his heels, looked down at his scotch and water. He let the silence draw out. He shook his head once, a slight puzzled motion as if he were considering one argument and had abandoned it.

Betty, who seldom drank, took a long scotch from

one of the passing waiters. Black noticed that her hand trembled slightly.

Finally Grotteschele spoke. His voice was extremely gentle.

"In a full-scale nuclear war between America and Russia a hundred million people, more or less, will be killed—right?" he asked Foster.

"A hundred million," Foster repeated, "or more."

The circle of people about the speakers moved restlessly. Betty finished her drink in a gulp and looked for a waiter. Black moved closer to her.

"Things would be shaken up," Grotteschele went on. "Our culture and their culture would not be the same. Granted?"

"Granted," Foster said. He grinned toughly.

"Now this is a tragedy and no one here denies that," Grotteschele said and his eyes swept generously over the group, lingered on Senator Hartmann. "But would you not grant that the culture which is the best armed, has the best bomb shelters, the best retaliatory capacity, the strongest defense, would have an ancient and classical advantage?"

"Which is?" Foster asked.

"It would be the victor in that it would be less damaged than its enemy," Grotteschele said. "Every war, including thermonuclear war, must have a victor and a vanquished. Are you suggesting, Foster, that we should be the vanquished? Do you value American culture less than the Soviet culture?"

Betty's hand had tightened on Black's arm.

"Marvelous," Foster said and his grin was now so deep it was almost ferocious. "Simply marvelous. So neat, so logical, so well ordered."

He paused and looked at Grotteschele. Grotteschele did not nod for he knew this was the opening of an attack. He smiled at Foster and for the first time it was

a smile of condescension.

"Groteschele, it should persuade a monkey, a high-school kid, maybe an Air Force general, maybe a Senator, but not many others," Foster said savagely. "It indicates only that you are a prisoner."

"Of what?" Groteschele said.

"Of the past, of stale ideas, of clichés," Foster said. He paused and looked around the group. "What is called for," he said, "is a complete and revolutionary breakthrough in our thinking. We are like men enclosed in a paper sack of old ideas and assumptions. The sack surrounding us appears to be complete and seamless, when in reality all we have to do is to break out of it to stand in the freedom of entirely new thoughts and approaches. What the times call for is a new Karl Marx—"

"A new Marx, Foster," Groteschele broke in, "an arresting thought. What would the new manifesto proclaim?"

"It would proclaim peace," Foster said without hesitation. "Not because peace is nice or I like my fellow humans or it is Christian or Gandhi hated violence or the sick-sick-kind of liberal chants it. Peace because it is the only way we can live. Get with it, Groteschele. Probability and the cobalt bomb made you old-fashioned ten years ago. Be realistic."

Foster's magazine had a circulation of only thirty thousand. The affluent and influential people he spoke before now were—one would think—more the Henry Luce type. Yet they were visibly impressed.

"Moving, very moving," Groteschele said. "But somewhat dangling, a bit suspended, no indication of how we get from war to peace. No one wants war, Foster. But the possibility of war just happens to be a reality. I want us to face realities."

"All right, Groteschele, look at it from the view-

point of the anthropologist," Foster said. "What is war's function?"

"The resolution of conflict," Groteschele snapped.

"In primitive societies how do men resolve their conflicts?" Foster asked.

"By individual combat," Groteschele said. He had pulled his shoulders back and was somewhat more tense. This type of dialogue where his opponent turned Socrates made him restless.

"And when they become organized into tribes?" Foster said.

"Then the fighting becomes collective," Groteschele said.

"And when they become nation-states?"

"It is still violence, damn it, Foster," Groteschele said. "What is irresponsible is to suggest that as groups become bigger and the power of weapons more immense that anything is changed."

Foster cut in rudely. "Are you suggesting that a spear thrown and a nuclear bomb dropped are comparable? Just a difference in degree? Nonsense! Is it not possible, Groteschele, that war itself has become obsolete? Your superbly reasoned *Counter-Escalation* indicates that in any possible war the overwhelming majority of citizens are going to be killed. Does this suggest to you still that war is a resolution of conflicts?"

"Foster, you are hopelessly sentimental," Groteschele said. "The situation is no different than it was a thousand years ago. There were primitive wars in which populations were totally destroyed. The point is, who is going to be the victor and who the victim? It is still a question of the survival of a culture."

Foster rocked on his heels.

"A culture," he said slowly, his voice full of wonder.

"A culture with most of its people dead, the rotting smell of death in the air for years, its vegetation burned off, the germ plasm of survivors contaminated. You say I am the utopian and you are the realist. Do you really think that this world you describe is a culture?"

Groteschele was familiar with every gambit. His reply was reasonable, quietly uttered, and difficult to refute. He drew it out to great length. The spectators listened respectfully.

It was Betty who broke the spell. Before Black realized it, she had moved from his side, drunk, yet at the same time rigidly controlled.

"It is hopeless," she said, staring at the two men. "You are both romantics caught up in your fantasy world of logic and reason and that is why it is so damned hopeless. Because man himself has become obsolete. He is like the dodo and the dinosaur but for the opposite reason. His damned brain has gotten us into this mess because of its sophistication and we cannot get out of it because of his pride. Man has calculated himself into so specialized a braininess that he has gone beyond reality. And he cannot tap the truth of his viscera because that, for a specialist, is the ultimate sin."

Black had not heard her speak with such overcontrol for years. Her words fell like a pall on the group. Even Groteschele was at a loss for the right thing to say. He went through a ritual of taking a Philippine cigar from a small leather cigar case in his pocket. Since the Bay of Pigs episode he had stopped smoking Cuban cigars.

"You think I've overdone it?" As Betty spoke a new quality seemed to come over her. Black looked at her with increasing concern. An inner intensity was flow-

ing from her, almost visibly. It acted like a powerful magnet on everyone present, drawing their eyes to her, holding their rapt attention.

"The world," Betty continued, her voice now edged with despair, "is no longer man's theater. Man has been made into a helpless spectator. The two evil forces he has created—science and the state—have combined into one monstrous body. We're at the mercy of our monster and the Russians are at the mercy of theirs. They toy with us as the Olympian gods toyed with the Greeks. And like the gods of Greek tragedy, they have a tragic flaw. They know only how to destroy, not how to save. That's what we're now watching in our cold war: a Greek tragedy in modern form with our godlike monsters playing out the last act of their cataclysmic tragedy."

She stopped and looked at Black quickly, as if seeking help. But before he could speak or move toward her she was speaking again.

"We all know that the big explosion is going to happen. Your concern, the two of you, is to make sure that you die intellectually correct. But my problem is more primitive. I only want to make sure that when it comes and my boys are dying that I am there to ease their last pain with morphine."

She finished in a flat voice entirely without self-pity. Her last statement seemed to give Groteschele a new assurance, a place to get back into the conversation and guide it into safe channels. His words came on gently and kindly.

"Betty," he said, "those of us who know anything about the situation feel almost exactly the same things that you have expressed. But what should we do? All go out and buy morphine? You see, Betty, I'm trying to *save* your two boys, not narcotize their death. That's

the whole point of everything I've written. In spite of all our efforts, thermonuclear war may come. We must face that possibility rather than, ostrichlike, close our minds to it. And I'm trying to see that if war comes, men, our kind of men, have the maximum possible chance of surviving it."

Betry looked composed now but her fingers were digging into Black's arm.

"General Black, what do you think?" asked Senator Hartmann.

Black looked up slowly from Betry. He fixed his eyes on Foster and thought for a minute.

"I think that Betry is mostly correct," he said slowly. "Once one knows where he wants to go he can summon a magnificent array of logic and fact to support his argument. I have the awful feeling that we are reconciled, both we and the Soviets, to mutual destruction. We are now rallying our different logics to support our identical conclusions. We will probably both get the results that we want. In that case, morphine is more important than a bomb shelter." He stopped and for a moment he felt an excitement. It was wild and irrational: he understood the Dream. He was in a game in which the things that held him together were being stripped away. Then, quite suddenly, he could go no further.

Betry's comments had just about done it for the party. Everyone drank and chatted politely for a few minutes. Then there was the intricate ballet of social disengagement. Black knew that their host would not forget his heretical position. The Senator was a methodical man.

In the taxicab back to their apartment neither Black nor Betry had spoken. She had fallen asleep on his shoulder, her teeth grinding.

General Black snapped back to the present as the Cesna 310 approached Andrews Air Force Base out-side of Washington. Looking down on the water-veined flats of the Chesapeake Bay area, he regretted that the air approach to Andrews didn't take him over Washington proper. He never ceased to be stirred by the splendor of the Washington Monument's slim white spire, the awesome majesty of the Lincoln Monument. The Pentagon, though, that was something else again. Its low, squat improbable shape was not designed to capture an airman's fancy. It was more like a great, bureaucratic land battleship pulled up alongside the Potomac. That's about what it was, mused Black, laying siege to the helpless flotilla of weaker bureaucratic ships across the Potomac.

Back to work, Blackie, boy-general, he said to himself. Life is earnest, life is real.

He brought the plane in for a skilled and effortless landing. Ten minutes later he was in a staff car and on his way to the Pentagon.